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Talking with the dead: Spirit mediumship, affect and embodiment in Stoke-on-Trent

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While Spiritualism has attracted much attention in other disciplines, geographers have largely ignored it. However, we agree with Holloway (2006 *Enchanted spaces: the séance, affect, and geographies of religion Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 96, pp. 182–7) that Spiritualism presents conceptual challenges that make it worthy of more attention. As Holloway suggests, the themes of affect, embodiment and materiality are particularly helpful in exploring religious experiences. The focus of this paper is on the practice and experience of spirit mediumship in a Spiritualist setting. In mediumship, a specific challenge is to materialise and embody spirit such that spirit communication feels personal and rings true. For us, this suggests that mediumship is routinely successful both because it can produce accurate messages, which are judged empirically, and also because it produces what we call affectual truths, which are judged tacitly on whether they feel right or not. To account for this, we introduce the idea of inter-mediumship to describe interactions in the space in-between the medium and the congregation. It is through this space in-between that the affects associated with mediumship emerge, are experienced and are verified. Rather than seeing spirit communication as somehow enchanted or extraordinary, we assert that talking with the dead is predicated on the ordinarieness of the experience: that is, that talking with the dead is emblematic of affect and embodiment in everyday life.

KEYWORDS

affect, embodiment, intermediumship, materiality, mediumship, spiritualism

1 | INTRODUCTION: ON SÉANCES, AFFECT AND THE ORDINARINESS OF THE EXTRAORDINARY

Just over a decade ago, Julian Holloway (2006) provided the first and – for all practical purposes – only discussion of the Spiritualist movement by a geographer. The silence of geographers on the Spiritualist movement is in direct contrast to the growing clamour of work in other disciplines, represented by recent sizeable works such as *The Ashgate research companion to nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the Occult* (edited by Kontou & Willburn, 2012), the five-volume compilation of primary sources *Spiritualism, mesmerism and the occult, 1800–1920* (edited by McCorristone, 2012) and the three-volume collection on *The Spiritualist movement* (edited by Moreman, 2013). There has been long-standing work in cultural history on the relationship between Victorian occult thinking and modernity, epitomised by authors such as Janet Oppenheim

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(1985), Alison Winter (1998), Simon During (2002), Alex Owen (2004) Owen (2011) and Marina Warner (2006), as well as related research into contemporary paranormal cultures, such as by Chris Partridge (2005) and Jenzen and Munt (2013). Combined, this body of evidence demonstrates that it is very hard to overestimate the significance of Victorian and contemporary occulture in the production of what we think of as secular modernity (see Geoghegan, 2016; Styers, 2004; Wilson, 2013c).

Even so, the abiding impression is that Spiritualism – as a religion and as a focus for scientific enquiry – did not outlast the Second World War. In the last decade, however, there has been a growing realisation that Spiritualism continues to be a vibrant and inventive religion, highly tuned to wider changes in religion and spirituality (Heelas, Woodhead, Seel, Szerszynski, & Tusting, 2005) and the development of post-secular society (Cloke & Beaumont, 2013; for a review, see Bartolini, Chris, MacKian, & Pile, 2017; Bartolini, MacKian, & Pile, 2017). Regardless, it may be that the Spiritualist movement offers nothing of interest to geographers. Yet, Holloway's paper establishes very good reasons why geographers should be interested in Spiritualism – and its archetypal practice, the séance.

For Holloway (2006), Spiritualism raises significant questions about how we understand affect, embodiment and spirituality in general. Consequently, he introduces (what he calls) a vitalised understanding of space into the study of religion and beliefs. This vitalised understanding of space has three key themes: affect, embodiment and the performance of spiritual or sacred spaces. Holloway argues that

to ignore, for the most part, the role of affect, emotion, and corporeal practice in the realization of [religious-spiritual] spaces is to sideline both a key aspect of these spaces themselves, and a key element in the circulation of religious-spiritual discourses and the identities that produce and are produced by them. (2006, p. 182)

Drawing on Jane Bennett (2001), Holloway argues that séances enabled Victorians to see the extraordinary in the everyday and the mundane – and thus to be *enchanted*. For Holloway (and Bennett), this enchantment paradoxically both transfixes and transports: transfixing Spiritualists in the moment of the séance, but also transporting them to other worlds. Thus, the séance produces enchanted spaces, where the extraordinary is now visible in the ordinary. Enchantment is located both in the idea of a transcendent world beyond the visible and in the existence of a translucent veil between the visible and invisible. In Victorian Spiritualism, seeing through the veil required an extraordinary practice: the séance – which was often performed in darkened rooms, sometimes with specialised spirit cabinets, but usually involving direct contact between the medium and the sitters via a circle of hands. Holloway leaves us with the impression that the séance remains the central practice through which Spiritualists talk with the dead. This is not our experience of contemporary Spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent (or elsewhere). Nevertheless, we wish to develop Holloway's insight into the significance of embodiment and affect in the production of spiritual experiences and spiritual spaces. Therefore, we focus on the Spiritualist practice of mediumship, which, through its forms of embodiment, creates a space through which specific affects emerge in relation to spirit.

Since Holloway's intervention, a number of geographers have explored the themes of affect and embodiment in the exploration of religious sites and practices. Thus, for example, Finlayson (2009; see also Finlayson & Mesev, 2014) has investigated the ways that religious and spiritual spaces are designed to inspire a range of emotional responses, such as peace and contemplation, joy and awe, serenity and transcendence, homeliness and a sense of the divine. For Finlayson, such emotional responses are directly and intimately connected to the creation of places of worship and the poetics of sacred space (see also Saunders, 2012). Similarly, Holloway (2012) has found that religious rituals use affective techniques to enable the emergence of specific registers of affect and emotion, such as contemplation and ecstatic expression, or joy and peace, but also (righteous) anger. We can observe that Finlayson and Holloway identify a select range of affects and emotions. These affectual and emotional registers of religious experience are directly connected to numinous material practices, whether in the form of architecture, landscape design or rituals such as prayer or divine services.

Along these lines, Dwyer, Gilbert, and Shah (2013) have shown that faith-based material practices and cultures weave religion into the fabric of suburban life (see also Naylor & Ryan, 2002). For Kong (2001), religious practices themselves solicit emotional responses. These practices are not confined to the "official" spaces of religion, but can also be woven through everyday life by the creation of "unofficial" sites (also Kong, 2010). Indeed, Heng (2016) has shown how spirit mediumship in Singapore can challenge "official" spaces of both religion and the state. Meanwhile, geographers have been quick to recognise that spiritual experiences are to be found in a variety of spatial practices that are both affectual and embodied: exemplary are Rose's (2010) analysis of the pilgrimage and Lea's (2008, 2009) investigation of yoga retreats (also, on spaces of retreats and new spiritualities, see Conradson, 2012).

Through religious spaces and places, then, it is understood that numinous embodied performances, emotional responses and affectual registers emerge: that is (though it is rarely framed exactly this way) that a sense of the divine or of the

spiritual distinguishes lived religious experience from ordinary, modern life. For Holloway, this is captured by the idea of “faithful dispositions” (2012, p. 205), while for others it resides in a sense of “piety” (Gökariksel, 2009, p. 661) or the “affective capacity [of] sacred materialities” (Finlayson, 2009, p. 1770). This indicates that, somehow, religious experience sets a challenge for understanding embodied, lived experience as well as the emergence of affect – as it appears to suggest that religious experience is a special case; or, at least, that religious rituals, practices, performances, places and spaces, etc., work hard to solicit a specific range of emotions and affects, which then become the hallmark of religious or spiritual experience.

For us, however, Spiritualism challenges the distinction between sacred or extraordinary experience and profane or ordinary experience (see Gergan, 2015; Holloway, 2006); a view that chimes with Jean-Luc Nancy’s (2013) observation that the ordinary supplies an access point to the sacred because the sacred is already enfolded into the ordinary. We wish to emphasise the ordinariness of Spiritualist religious practices and sites. Thus, we do not see Spiritualist practices and sites as supporting a culture of enchantment (contra Bennett). Quite the reverse, in fact: the miraculous is rendered mundane. Thus, the challenge of Spiritualist religious experience is that it cannot simply be distinguished from secular experiences (say, in the way that della Dora, 2016 does). Instead, we show that talking with the dead, as practised in Spiritualism, is predicated on ordinary communication (see Wooffitt, 2006). Even so, as Davidson and Milligan (2004) have argued, affect and emotion are only understandable in the context of their production and circulation – and, for us, this context is necessarily spatial.

So, we introduce the idea of *intermediumship* to describe the specific form of mediation of affects and bodies in spirit communication. This new term is necessary for two reasons. First, we wish to emphasise that affects emerge *between* bodies, even while this does not mean that those bodies are equally or reciprocally involved in the production of affects. Thus, we wish to focus on the space between bodies that enables religious affects to emerge during spirit communication. For us, the production of this space in-between is essential for understanding how talking with the dead routinely works. In our analysis of this space in-between, we emphasise how the emergence of affects interferes with the dichotomies between materiality and immateriality, between the thing and its representation, between body and spirit. Second, we wish to emphasise the *indeterminacy* of emergent affects – which is partly enabled by attempts to avoid deliberately managing affects, in both their production and circulation.

Indeterminacy parallels Nancy’s (2013) argument that the sacred is undecidable. However, for us, it is also the ordinary that is undecidable. In mediumship, this double-sided indeterminacy is managed by verifying messages from the dead in two ways, both of which are entangled one with the other. On the one hand, messages are evaluated for their accuracy against reality. On the other hand, communication is also understood tacitly as being true to the spirit of the dead person, or not. A message, then, is assessed as being either factually or affectually correct, or both, or neither. We argue that, because both the sacred and the ordinary are experienced ultimately as indeterminate, it is *affectual truth* that comes to play a more significant role in the success, or otherwise, of mediumship demonstrations. This observation parallels Holloway’s (2003) argument that New Age spiritualities are assessed as “correct” or “true” through their embodied practices and the ways that they enact the sacred in everyday life.

As we have said, little is known about contemporary Spiritualism – and almost nothing about Spiritualism in the UK (with the notable exception of David Wilson, 2013a). So, we begin with a description of Spiritualism based on fieldwork conducted over an 18-month period between spring 2014 and winter 2015 at all three Spiritualist churches in Stoke-on-Trent (see also Bartolini, MacKian, et al., 2017). Although the fieldwork was designed to explore the place of spirit in the everyday life of Spiritualists, we found that spirit mediumship plays a significant role in providing evidence for the persistence of spirit after death. So, the main part of the paper will focus on spirit mediumship, drawing out the themes of embodiment, materiality and affect (following Holloway). We use the idea of intermediumship to account for the ordinary manifestation of the seemingly extraordinary experience of talking with the dead. As we will discover, key to intermediumship is the materialisation of the immaterial through the body and the production of meaningful affectual experiences – by the medium, by the congregation and by spirit. By focusing on intermediumship, we are better able to see the spatial processes that underlie the success (or otherwise) of spirit communication.

2 | SPIRITUALISM IN STOKE-ON-TRENT

Stoke-on-Trent has three active Spiritualist churches, in Burslem, Longton and Fenton. Of these, the Longton Church is perhaps the most well-known nationally, as it was home to long-time President of the Spiritualist National Union, Gordon Higginson (1918–1993). All three of Stoke-on-Trent’s Spiritualist churches have their own premises, two of which are modern and purpose-built. They draw in a mainly working-class congregation of people who have lived in Stoke-on-Trent

all their lives. Their congregations are mostly aged between 30 and late 60s, with more women than men attending. Attendances vary from about 30 to more than 100 people. People are often in friendship or family groups, sometimes with younger teenagers. This is broadly consistent with the detailed picture of Spiritualism in Montreal provided by Deirdre Meintel (see, for example, Meintel, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2014). Significantly, all three of Stoke-on-Trent's churches currently have female Presidents.

Inside Stoke-on-Trent's churches, layouts resemble that of modern churches in the Protestant tradition. The decor is simple, yet spiritual. While spiritual imagery often draws on familiar Christian elements (such as angels, shrines with tall thin candles and flower arrangements), they also include non-Christian elements, notable among these are images of Native Americans and Native American artefacts such as dream catchers. Once through the reception area, the churches have rows of chairs (rather than pews). These face a raised platform. On the platform are a couple of easy chairs and a lectern (either to the side or in the middle). At the back, and on the side walls, there are a few pictures, often of leading church figures. The over-riding impression is that it is all very "matter of fact" and "home made".

Spiritualist services strongly resemble Christian religious services. This includes both the physical arrangement of the religious space, with the key figures at the front and the congregation sat in rows, and the order of the service, which includes hymns, prayers and a lesson. There are up to two services a week. On Sundays, there is a divine service, which is more formal, so involves hymns and prayers drawn from the New Spiritualist hymn book. During the week, the service is less formal, with songs and prayers being drawn from ordinary life. Unlike Christian services, however, an hour of the service is devoted to "platform mediumship" (which we will describe in the next section): that is, to talking with the dead. The churches also offer healing and range of other activities, such as development circles (Wilson, 2013b). These findings could be transplanted to Montreal, Vancouver or San Diego with little modification (see Biscop, 2013; Meintel, 2005; Moore, 2013).

Spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent is characteristically anti-dogmatic. All the churches subscribe to the seven principles (as described on the Spiritualist National Union website, snu.org.uk):

1. The Fatherhood of God
2. The Brotherhood of Man
3. The Communion of Spirits and the Ministry of Angels
4. The Continuous Existence of the Human Soul
5. Personal Responsibility
6. Compensation and Retribution Hereafter for all the Good and Evil Deeds done on Earth
7. Eternal Progress Open to Every Human Soul

Yet, there is great variability between – and within – the churches as to what these might mean. So, for example, God can be viewed as a universal intelligence, but also as an abstract principle (without gender), as a woman, as one among many Gods, or even as an alien intelligence, and so on. Similarly, Spiritualism is syncretic, drawing on non-Christian traditions. For example, the English tradition of Spiritualism has made use of Native American spirit guides since at least the 1920s (Nelson, 1969). In services, spirit guides are often mentioned and "Native Spirituality" often drawn on for inspiration, as well as practices such as shamanism and meditation. Here, angels (as mentioned in the seven principles) perform double duty, as they function both within and outside of Christian beliefs. Many spiritualists have seen angels or had messages from them. Indeed, Rebecca Moore (2013, p. 162) reports that angels are of central importance for Spiritualists in San Diego. Despite differences, what unites Spiritualist churches is the practice of talking with the dead.

At the heart of Spiritualist services is the demonstration of spirit communication. It is called a demonstration because its purpose is to provide evidence of the persistence of spirit after death. Arguably, this makes spirit communication more akin to science than to the doctrinal or dogmatic religions that rely on faith (i.e. belief without question). Thus, while the demonstration's purpose is to produce evidence, what people make of that evidence is left for them to decide. The explicit intent is that this evidence is to be judged, by the receiver of the message, on its factual content – even if these facts need to be verified later. So, is it accurate? Is it right? Nevertheless, as we will see, this evidence is also tacitly tested affectually. So, does it ring true? Does it feel right? Spirit communication, thus, is judged to be successful not only when the messages contain information that could only be known by spirit but also when the receiver of the message feels that the messages are personal and true to the spirit of the dead person. We argue that this verification relies on the production of a space in-between, which we call intermediumship.

So, in the next section, we provide a "composite" account of a Spiritualist mediumship demonstration, based on our experience of more than 20 services along with interviews with Spiritualists, mediums and healers as well as conversations

with members of the congregation. To protect people's identities (as far as possible), names and details have been altered. However, we believe that the stories below will be recognisable as accurate by anyone who has attended a Spiritualist service. We will give many examples of messages that are taken to be accurate: significantly, this shows that factual and affectual judgements about accuracy are entangled and themselves indeterminate. As importantly, we will show how mundane the content of the messages tends to be.

3 | PLATFORM MEDIUMSHIP IN STOKE-ON-TRENT

We arrive half an hour before the Spiritualist service is due to begin. We are greeted warmly by the President. We chat for a bit, before taking seats towards the back of the church. The church is already a third full, as more people trickle in. One of our key informants comes over: "You are in for a good one tonight." "Oh?" "Yes, you'll see what I mean." "Right." We shuffle our belongings. "Can we take pictures during the demonstration?" The President leaves to check with the medium, who is in a back room preparing. "No", comes the reply, "but we're happy for you to take pictures before and afterwards – I'll set it up for you, if you like." "That'd be great." A couple of pictures are taken, but it feels intrusive to take more (Figure 1).

The medium appears at the back of the hall and is ushered respectfully to the front by the President. The congregation settles into place. Save for one or two chairs here and there, the church is now full. Some people sit quietly, while others are talking in slightly hushed tones. Most people have come with others, but a few are on their own. Afterwards, the President will tell us that the congregation is mainly made up of regulars, but there are a few she has never seen before. This is normal. The church – like all other Spiritualist churches in Stoke-on-Trent – has an active programme of visiting speakers. Mediums are in great demand, so have to be booked well in advance. Some mediums are very well known, locally, regionally and nationally, while others are just starting their mediumship careers. Mostly, mediums work alone, but sometimes they work in pairs. Not only is there a balance in terms of gender, some mediums are gay or lesbian. Mediums – and Spiritualist congregations – are dominated by the white working class.

The service begins in ways that will be familiar to Christians, especially on Sundays, with the singing of a hymn. During the week, pop songs with a spiritual theme replace some hymns. In Stoke, Robbie Williams' "Angels" is a particular favourite. Just before the mediumship demonstration, a short "thought for the day" is given. Usually, this is given by the medium, and is often a series of ideas sparked by something that has happened recently, either in the medium's personal life or in world news. This evening, very unusually, the President herself has decided to deliver a reading from a book about a Native American spirit guide, Silver Birch. She develops the theme of looking after nature, guided by the idea that the earth also looks after us. She concludes that spiritual wellbeing is impossible without taking care of both nature and the soul. Many in the congregation nod thoughtfully: nature is a common theme in Spiritualist discussions. The President smiles; it is now time for the demonstration.

All mediums begin with a rehearsed set of introductory remarks. These introductions have common features (see Gilbert, 2014; Hunter, 2011; Kavan, 2013). First, the medium will say a bit about themselves and how they receive spirit. They



FIGURE 1 The congregation gather for a Spiritualist service, 2015

Source: Photo by author

assure the audience that nothing alarming or scary will happen. Second, each medium offers an explanation as to why particular spirits will communicate, while others might remain silent. Some mediums suggest that spirit is always with you, while others think of the demonstration as acting more like a beacon that attracts spirits who wish to communicate. Many mediums talk about the cacophony of voices, saying that it is hard to avoid listening to the loudest voices first. Sometimes messages come from spirit that has no, or no strong, connection to members of the audience. From the outset, it is explained that communication with the dead is fraught with possibilities for miscommunication and mistakes. Third, all mediums are explicit that they want the audience to give clear “yes” or “no” answers. They explain that as the purpose of the demonstration is to establish a link between the living and the dead, they need to know whether that link is the correct one or not.

This restriction to “yes” or “no” is also an explicit attempt to avoid unwanted communication of information, intentionally or unconsciously. Restricting communication from the receiver of the message in this way overtly focuses judgements about the accuracy of a message on its factual content. Significantly, the demonstration is imperilled by the possibility that facts being communicated by the medium derive from the congregation, whether through conscious, unconscious and/or (as mediums put it) psychical means. As Wilson says, the medium must give “descriptions of dead people (or of other information about them) known to the recipient of the message but that are *accepted by the recipient and congregation as unknown to the medium*” (Wilson, 2013b, p. 27, emphasis added). Many mediums add that if a spirit has chosen to communicate, it’s only polite to talk back . . . there is no place for shyness. The receiver of the message is only permitted two responses, but respond they must.

Often mediums explain how their personal lives attune them to particular aspects of spirit life: a medium who works in the medical profession explains that she is especially tuned to the specifics of illness, while another (uniquely) will pick up the favourite flowers or foods of spirit. The medium’s introduction can be a few or several minutes long; its length is determined by whether the medium feels that the congregation is familiar (if they’ve been to the church before) or experienced (with few new members in it). Even so, the introductory remarks presume the congregation has never experienced spirit mediumship before. Often enough, the presence of spirit forces mediums to speed up or curtail what they were going to say. Perhaps paradoxically, this heightens everyone’s attention and anticipation.

“I have someone coming through now.” The medium focuses on spirit. The congregation is silent, still, expectant.

Mediums use a range of techniques for opening up lines of communication between spirit and the living. In any one demonstration, the medium commonly uses more than one technique to establish a link with spirit.

Occasionally, the medium will address the audience, “I have someone here who suffered a trauma . . . associated with the heart . . . it was unexpected . . . can anyone take this?” Communication that begins this way tends to be very difficult. There is too little specific detail for the audience or the medium to grasp who wants to talk with whom.

More often, mediums start by looking towards a specific area of the church, as directed by spirit. The medium will say, “I have someone with me who wants to send a message; I feel guided to someone sitting in this area over here; does the name Arthur mean anything to anyone?” Now, not all mediums will refer to spirit by name. However, in establishing the right connection, details – especially names and locations – create confidence in both the medium and the congregation that spirit is communicating with them specifically.

Perhaps surprisingly, it is common for mediums to identify the person that spirit wants to talk to – and will talk directly to them. On one remarkable occasion, the medium points to two women, one sat behind the other. They glance at one another, not sure who he means. “Yes, you two, both of you”, the medium says. He asks the women whether they know Grace. The woman at the front nods, “Yes”. The medium responds: “I am confused – the woman sat behind you, does Grace mean anything to you”. The second woman replies: “Yes, Grace was my mother”. “Ok,” the medium says, “let’s try to figure out who we’re dealing with . . . Do either of you know Paul?” The woman at the front nods, “Yes”. The medium pauses. Again, he says: “I am confused – the woman behind, does Paul mean anything to you?” The woman replies, “Yes – that’s my father”. The woman in front spins around abruptly to face the woman sat behind her. “My God”, she exclaims, “Grace and Paul were my parents too”. The congregation audibly gasps and excited whispered conversations break out around the church. Instead of looking triumphant at naming both women’s parents (what are the chances?), the medium looks downcast and perplexed. Now, he does not know which woman spirit wishes to communicate with. (It transpired that it was the parents of the woman in front.)

Once a connection is established, the communication will often involve further details such as names, places and special dates as well as descriptions of the person in spirit, their physique and personality. Spirit often communicates using objects and images, showing the medium something of significance. One time, spirit makes the medium aware of a watch. The medium seeks confirmation through a series of questions. “Is it a Hamilton watch?” “Do you keep it in an upstairs room?” “Is it in a chest of drawers you rarely use?” “In the top right hand drawer?” “You cherish this watch, don’t you?” A series

of “yesses” confirm the connection between spirit and the receiver of the message. Spirit explains how much the watch meant to her and how much she wanted her daughter to have it. Spirit adds: “I know you never take it out”. Tears roll down the woman’s face, yet she calmly replies “Yes”. Observations such as this sometimes produce tears, yet it would be wrong to think that messages produce only sadness. More often, the tone is comforting and satisfying – and often spirit communication is punctuated by the pleasure and laughter of recognition.

Suddenly the medium turns his head, as if he’s seen something in the corner of his eye. “What?!” he says, to what appears to be thin air. There’s a long pause. His face wrinkles into a puzzled expression. “Okay, okay . . . got it”. He looks directly at a woman sat two rows back. “This message is for you, my dear: do long black boots mean anything to you?” The woman is taken aback, shocked not just that she has been picked out without warning, but also that the message is somewhat cryptic. Unphased, the medium continues: “I have this image of trying on long boots”. He mimes pulling on long boots. “Do you recognise this? You seem to be having a good time.” The woman bursts out laughing. She looks at her friend: then they both crack up laughing. Excitedly, the women talk to each other. “Okay,” the medium says, “what’s going on?” “It’s my friend”, the woman replies. Between spirit, the medium and the woman, a story emerges: she and her friend had gone out shopping and ended up trying all kinds of shoes for fun, that was just before her friend died of a long-term illness. In particular, a pair of kinky black boots had caused them to fall about laughing. As the woman describes the scene, the congregation joins in the fun – everyone is giggling and joking.

Very often, within an hour, there will be time for about five to eight connections to be established. The communications depend on what spirit has to say and the clarity of the message. Sometimes, mediums appear to break off the communication early, often when it seems that another spirit is demanding their turn. Before turning to the next communication, mediums will usually end the communication by saying something along the lines of “Spirit would like you to know that they are with you” and that “They want to leave you with a message of love”, ending with, “Can I leave that with you?” The receiver of the message almost always says “Thank you”.

Towards the end of the hour, all the mediums look exhausted, yet energised, by the experience of talking with the dead. The mediums often end by thanking the congregation, and also apologising to people who did not receive messages. The service is wrapped up by a member of the church, usually telling the congregation about the next services.

We wait at the back of the church as people leave. Several people are waiting patiently to talk to the medium. We take the opportunity to chat to members of the congregation, especially those who had received messages. Regular members of the congregation have seen many mediums and will often have seen the more experienced mediums many times before. Such familiarity gives them a more critical stance on the performance, routinely assessing the “hits” and “misses”. Even so, everyone knows that spirit communication is fraught with difficulties. While Spiritualists all wish the demonstration to succeed, they will not collude with the medium over misunderstandings or miscommunications.

The medium softly intones, “I feel someone who wishes to communicate with someone sitting in this area over here”. She waves her hand in the general direction. The people sitting there sit up, waiting. “It’s a woman.” “Music is important to her.” No-one puts their hand up. The medium persists. “I see her performing.” A woman in the congregation who has been quietly knitting stops. In a clear voice, she says “Yes”. The medium focuses on her. “I see her singing.” “No.” “She’s on stage.” “No.” “She used to travel around for music.” “No.” The medium is perplexed. The woman explains: “My mum played in an orchestra, but she was never on stage or went anywhere, it was a bit of fun – I don’t know who it is, but that’s not my mum.” The medium is resigned to failure, and moves on to the next message. Such moments of failure are expected and, significantly, do not undermine the overall experience of the demonstration.

At the heart of the demonstration is the question, is it real or fake? This question has dominated research (such as that by the Society for Psychical Research, founded 1882 and still going strong). Spiritualists expect to evaluate all evidence and do not simply take it at face value. Thus, many Spiritualists remain sceptical about a particular message until they have had the same message from two different mediums. So, a hit on the night would not necessarily be convincing evidence. Indeed,

many Spiritualists maintain that the most valuable (because convincing) communications they have received have comprised information they have initially been unable to accept but have subsequently been able to verify. (Wilson, 2013b, p. 29)

The mediumship demonstration thus resembles a scientific meeting, where evidence is presented and then subsequently analysed. Often, the results of this will remain unknown to everyone except the receiver of the message.

For our purposes, however, the “fake or real?” question masks the significance of embodiment and affect in the production of (routinely) successful spirit communication. It also over-privileges the role of the medium, thereby missing the

significance of spatiality in the production of the experience of spirit communication. To grasp this, we will talk about intermediumship. This term is deployed as an attempt to recognise that successful communication relies as much on spirit and the congregation as the medium. Importantly, this term is also an attempt to acknowledge the difficulty of knowing *where* messages come from. Significantly, successful communication relies on the contradictory role of the medium – who must know the message, but cannot know its origins or meaning. For us, therefore, indeterminacy – both of the message and of its origins – is integral to intermediumship. Put another way, spirit communication relies on a tacit understanding that all communication is indeterminate, precarious and prone to confusion and failure. What emerges between spirit, the medium, the message receiver and the congregation is convincing because of this, not despite it.

Next, we will discuss embodiment. This raises questions of the presentation of material – by spirit, mediums and their audiences – that is not actually present.

4 | WHAT MATTERS? RE-PRESENTING THE DISEMBODIED

The medium cocks her head slightly. She bends her knees so she is about six inches shorter. She moves her hands up in front of her shoulders. With her hands, she is searching for a movement, a gesture. She pushes her thumbs out and moves her hands back and forth. Her body slumps, slightly, and she begins to look fatter. Her face hardens noticeably and adopts a grin, as if she'd just told a crude joke. Her eyes narrow. She looks at a woman in the congregation. "The man with me", she says, "is wearing red braces – and he loves to push them out. He seems to be fond of a joke, this man. Rude jokes. Does anyone recognise him?" Someone does. "That's my father."

At another demonstration, the medium suddenly exclaims, mid-conversation: "Oh, those are my favourites! Ginger creams. The lady here loves ginger creams". The receiver of the message stifles a burst of laughter. "Yes, yes, she loved ginger creams!"

"I feel a pain in my heart, but I think this isn't what killed this man ... he's breathing heavily, choking ... his heart attacks didn't kill him, it was his breathing difficulties", the medium explains as she holds her hand to her heart, while her voice audibly changes to a croak. "Yes", a woman replies.

"Could you please slow down! I cannot hear what you're saying. You're going too fast! Please, it's too loud. What are you trying to say?", the medium complains. Spirit is so loud and so quick, it's hard to understand the message. A man in the congregation turns to his friend. "That's her alright", he says with a grin. Others around him respond with knowing smiles. They already know who it is.

Materialising spirits often relies on mundane observations. In one communication, the medium is talking with a woman about her mother. Then, suddenly, the pace of images quickens. "I see you in your kitchen, watching the washing machine. Your mother is by the sink, looking out of the window. That's on my right. On my left is a fridge." The medium takes a step forward. "I am out of the kitchen, there's a cupboard under the stairs on my right". The medium half bends down. "In the cupboard, there's a bread bin on the floor". The medium makes a gesture to reach towards the bin. "Oh, that's funny!", she says, "In the bread bin is a tot of gin. No bread. Your mother says, "You never know when you need a tot of gin!"". The woman in the congregation barely has time to say anything as this scene is played out ... but on these words excitedly exclaims "Yes, yes, that's exactly right!", followed quickly by laughter and then some tears. For the congregation, as it is for us, it is very easy to conjure up images of a kitchen, with a large window over the sink that looks over a backyard, a fridge, a hypnotic washing machine on spin cycle ... as this is the stuff of many kitchens. As much as familiarity, the medium's physical performance of movement as if in the kitchen and the surprising detail, all work to support the materialisation of the images in the message: giving spirit a physical presence, in a real place.

In physical mediumship, the problem of making spirit real is solved through the production of matter, especially – most notoriously – ectoplasm. Other mediums use art to produce physical representations of dead people, where the likeness of the portrait to the dead person (often in comparison to photographs) becomes tangible evidence of spirit. In platform mediumship, the physicality and materiality of spirit is produced in a wide variety of ways. None of these actually materialise spirit, but they do produce a set of images that help materialise spirit in the minds of the congregation. As we have shown, the production of physical correspondences includes acting like the dead person. By talking about objects, clothes, illnesses, foods, places and the like, messages are given a material form through which people can grasp the messages' meanings. These material forms – produced by often fragmentary descriptions – really matter. Message receivers recognise the material forms as real as mediums materialise them through their use of the body, of words and of images.

Spirit, then, is embodied using the materiality both of the medium's body and of images themselves. Spirit mediumship, then, is not simply about conveying messages, but about embodying those messages – that is, about making the messages

matter. If the test of communication is about the message receiver knowing more than the medium, accurately establishing the physical form of spirit messages is a clear way to provide such evidence. Thus, the test of successful communication is more than simply “how could the medium have known about the red braces?” Rather, the test is this: “how could the medium have known what my father did with his red braces?”

The paradox, of course, is that enactments, words, images do not materialise spirit, but only appear to. Spirit communication, then, interferes with any strict separation of the material and the immaterial, the thing and its representation, and between the word and the image. More than this, in seeing the significance of embodiment for establishing evidence, we can also see that messages matter not just because they are given a form, but also because they enable the production and circulation of affect.

5 | CAN YOU TAKE THIS? AFFECT AND INTERMEDIUMSHIP

There are three aspects of affect that we wish to highlight: first, affects need a form; second, affects emerge and circulate in a variety of ways; third, affects are indeterminate. Key to understanding affects in talking with the dead is an appreciation that they are unconsciously communicated: affect emerges between spirit, the medium and receiver of the message and the congregation – but it does not do so only as the result of consciously produced and shared emotions, nor does affect emerge in ways that might be deemed determinate, consistent or coherent. As importantly, the medium is not entirely responsible for the message and therefore is not the origin for the affects that emerge. In some ways, arguably, the medium is the last person to know the meaning of a message – and consequently the medium is always playing “catch up” when appreciating and managing emergent affects. Indeed, the message receiver is also struggling to figure out the meaning of the message, through the clues provided by the medium.

To think through this problem of not knowing where messages and affects emerge from, nor how they will be received and circulated, we will use the idea of intermediumship. Key to this idea is appreciating that spirit communication (routinely) works because it produces a form for affects that is recognised as real, accurate and true by the receiver of the message, the congregation, the medium *and* spirit. As importantly, it is only possible for these affectual forms to emerge because spirit communication also creates *a space between* spirit, the medium, the receiver of the message and the congregation – through the work of intermediumship. This work starts by framing the demonstration as providing evidence of the persistence of spirit after death.

Setting the demonstration in an evidence-based and analytical context tacitly frames the emotional responses that are available both to the medium and the congregation. This frame extends to the emotional registers that spirit can work in, too. This makes sense: the congregation is about to communicate with the dead, but no-one can be certain who has come to communicate, nor what content the messages from spirit might be, nor what the intentions behind a message are. To say the least, the medium is about to walk into an emotional minefield involving, on the surface, an inevitably difficult mix of love, loss, bereavement and grief (see Walliss, 2001). Indeed, the relationship between the dead and the living cannot be presumed to be ideal: dealing with the dead can as easily evoke feelings of guilt and shame or indeed anger and hatred. Mediums are clear that people who were difficult in life tend to be no better in death. Instead of the kind of faithful, religious and spiritual affective dispositions that Finlayson and Holloway speak of, we can see that the emotional terrain set out, and traversed, by mediums is relentlessly familiar.

Perhaps surprisingly, the mediums’ introductory talks tend not to discuss the emotions that may be raised in the demonstration, nor how these emotions will be dealt with when they well up. Rather, we believe, there is an implicit understanding that the release of even difficult feelings such as grief and loss, or anger and shame, whether controlled or uncontrolled, is okay. Tacitly, the church becomes a safe space for expressing feelings about spirit. On the surface, the scientific framing of the demonstration might tend to suggest emotional detachment and the suppression of affect. Yet, the introductory remarks have the opposite effect, enabling the congregation to feel what they feel – without having to use words to express those feelings.

The introductions create a space for affects, through which affects can be produced and circulated. In this space, the medium’s role is paradoxical. On the one hand, the medium is between spirit and the message receiver, actively establishing and mediating the communication between them, so inevitably complicit in the production and circulation of affects. Yet, on the other hand, the medium is at their most convincing when they do not know what is being communicated – that is, when the receiver of the message and the congregation are themselves producing and managing affects. Then there is spirit too: spirit must be involved because whatever affects are generated, they must “feel true” to spirit. This paradox is at the heart of intermediumship.

Even before a medium frames the demonstration with their introductory comments, the congregation is already doing affectual work prior to first contact with the dead. The congregation arrives with experiences and expectations (including those who have never attended a Spiritualist service before). While most are hoping that departed loved ones will come to communicate, many will confess that they do not want others to show up. During the medium's introduction, the congregation is quiet and respectful. Yet there are nods of acceptance as the medium outlines their personal understanding of what is going to happen. This acceptance is key. The congregation is not simply consenting to work with the medium to create a successful demonstration, they are also agreeing to receive spirit in whatever form spirit chooses to communicate. The congregation, further, tacitly accepts not only the differences in personality and style of each medium, but also their different attitudes towards spirituality. Together, these unspoken agreements establish a space of tolerance and trust.

As we have seen, the meaning of the message can reside in its empirical accuracy, especially when this is surprising, as when the medium discovers the tot of gin in the bread bin. However, the tot of gin gains further significance – deeper, more personal – when the message is understood (by the receiver of the message, the medium and the congregation) as being meaningful to spirit: “You never know when you need a tot of gin”. This indicates that the demonstration relies on establishing what we are calling affectual truths: the instinctive feeling that the message is true to the spirit of the dead person.

On the surface, the evidence of persistence of spirit appears to be established by the “yes” in response to a message, but this masks the grounding of the authenticity of a communication, both in the recognition of spirit by the message receiver (“that’s her alright”) and in the affirmation of the memories and feelings evoked by the communication (“long black boots”). Thus, the message is judged not just on its factual accuracy but also on its affectual truth. Assessing the evidence is vital, for it means that the congregation is responding to spirit more than to the medium. Further, it also means that the material presence of spirit relies as much on a feeling shared among the congregation as the factual information that the medium provides during the communication.

Establishing a shared feeling is the product of intermediumship, as both the congregation (as individuals and as a group) and the medium work together to generate a range of affects that “feel real”. It is possible that the more ordinary these affects feel, the more they can be taken as real. As important, intermediumship produces, and works in, spaces in-between, such as: between the medium and the congregation; between spirit and the medium; between the medium and the receiver of the message; between spirit and the receiver of the message; between everyone and the wider context of Stoke-on-Trent. Indeed, affectual truths are intimately entwined with the sense that messages are connected to real places and to people’s experiences of place. Thus, intermediumship, carefully and selectively, builds up a topography of interconnections through which affects can be transmitted and received, recognised and shared. In any communication, affectual truths can be difficult – and sometimes impossible – to establish. Rather than miscommunication and misunderstanding jeopardising the work of intermediumship, any failures to communicate are understood as being the consequence of the inherent difficulties of all communication.

The intensity of emergent affects often prompts people to respond physically. We have given several examples of crying and laughing. There are also gasps of amazement or surprise; nods of recognition and sympathetic looks. There is also hushed disappointment and whispered confusion when things go awry. These are common expressed emotions, yet their significance lies in how they permit or enable the wider congregation to share in the communication and recognise its affectual truths. More than this, these expressed emotions are rarely converted into speech. It is, then, significant that the emotional is simply left to be. There is no attempt to suture grief or stifle laughter. Intermediumship, then, requires a kind of affectual un-censoring, which is (paradoxically) enabled by a severe censoring of spoken communication (by limiting the congregation to the words yes or no). There is, moreover, another side to this censorship. Strangely, restricting what comes back from the message receiver verbally allows spirit more of a presence, because communication from spirit takes precedence over that of the living. In this way, spirit also participates in intermediumship.

The singular purpose of spirit communication, for spirit, is to convey something that is meaningful to them yet can also be shared with the person being communicated with. Yet, the messages often appear trivial on the surface: really, ginger creams? So, it is the affective truth of the message that carries its significance: it is the watch that meant so much to me; the pearl earrings I am so pleased you have; a desire for you to do well at work; a need for you to know that I am in a better place; that moment when we had so much fun together. Even so, affect does not simply *emerge* between these bodies (variously, spirit, the content of the message, the medium, the receiver of the message, the congregation): first, the message has to feel personal and ring true; then, it has to be explicitly recognised as such. This is the proper function of “yes” and “no”. These are the building blocks of intermediumship, as constant checking and re-checking establishes the foundations on which affectual truths can be assembled. Importantly, affectual truth in this context is subjective *and* shared: that is, recognised as true by everyone, even if they have no personal connection to the message. Significantly, the medium must appear neutral in the production of affectual truths: so, while mediums are central to the transmission of the message, they must appear entirely detached from its content and meaning.

Messages contain all kinds of forms that affect can gather around. There is no affect without an appropriate form. These forms provide the ground on which affectual truths can be established: examples we have given include rude jokes and kinky boots, ginger creams and a tot of gin. To be clear, these forms work not only because the receiver of the message verifies their accuracy, but also because they are understood to be meaningful to spirit. These affectual forms provide a focus for personal feelings and memories, yet also allow affect to circulate among everyone in the congregation, because others can recognise their significance even if they do not know the people involved. The space in-between the medium, spirit, message receiver and congregation, then, is produced through forms that transfix and transport everyone, empirically and affectually. Yet, as we can see, these forms are mundane, familiar, ordinary; neither extraordinary nor enchanting.

Affect is vital not because it has a material basis, nor because the bodies through which affect takes shape have a specific material form, nor because anyone is manipulating or managing affect, but precisely because intermediumship produces a space *between* spirit, message, receiver of the message, medium and congregation. Even so, while intermediumship draws attention to processes that enable affect to emerge and take form between spirit, medium and congregation, each of these play different parts. Spirit and congregation work hard to transmit and receive images and ideas that have affectual truth running through them, while the medium seeks to convey images and ideas in a way that enables that affectual truth to flow between spirit and congregation.

As we have shown, when affect and its form take shape for spirit, medium and congregation, the results can be dazzling and inexplicably precise. Yet, the communication is never less than precarious: at any point, it is liable to collapse. Much spirit communication is vague, confusing, contradictory and opaque. Still, spirit communication routinely works. Partly, this is because everyone knows that ordinary communication is fraught with possibilities for misunderstanding and error – so why would talking with the dead be any better? In fact, it ought to be worse. So, the difficulties of spirit communication implicitly confirm that the message does not originate with the medium. Rather, affect appears to begin with a body that is not in the room: spirit – a body without a body.

Talking with the dead might appear extraordinary or enchanting, but it is because it is so relentlessly ordinary that it works. At the end of every communication, the medium will say something along the lines of “spirit wants to leave you with a message of love”. This statement is usually received with a nod or a barely audible affirmation. The message of love might be expected to be a dramatic moment, but instead it is ritualistic, generic and emotionally muted: its obvious function is to end the communication on a positive note and, paradoxically, conveys little, if anything, of the love that might be felt. So, it is the ordinariness of these declarations that is revealing. Spirit communication might seem like a miracle – an opportunity to say one last time something of huge emotional significance. Yet, communication is not extraordinary. It is ordinary. And spirit mediumship works in, and with, a world that is simply ordinary.

6 | CONCLUSION: INTERMEDIUMSHIP, AFFECTUAL TRUTH AND THE CHALLENGE OF SPIRIT

To stand in front of a congregation to deliver evidence of the persistence of spirit after death might seem an extraordinary thing to do. Yet, the miracle of talking with the dead is routinely delivered on a weekly basis, at Spiritualist churches across the UK, America, Canada, Australia and elsewhere, by the demonstration of spirit communication. We have suggested that spirit communication is modelled on science. This has consequences. By converting spirit communication into a set of evidential procedures, Spiritualism takes faith out of its religion. Rather than establishing the enchanted nature of spirit communication, the demonstration renders it ordinary and mundane.

Establishing a connection between the dead and the living is fraught with possibilities for misunderstanding, miscommunication and mistakes. What is remarkable, of course, is that *any* kind of meaningful communication is established at all. Whether it is through descriptions of the person, their physicality and personality, through namings of various kinds, through places and through situations, or through numbers and dates, a convincing communication is established more often than it is not. Some of these are remarkable not simply for their detail, but for a style of communication in which the medium will *insist* on the importance of the message and wait for the member of the congregation to figure out its meaning, either during the demonstration or afterwards. Indeed, messages that are confusing or puzzling that later turn out to be accurate are the most convincing. Although the success of spirit communication would appear to reside in its production of verified facts, we argue that it relies most heavily on its ability to “ring true”, to “feel right”.

We have argued that spirit communication works because it generates affectual truths. These truths are grounded in the embodiment and materiality of communication; they are established by materialising the immaterial, by making representations material, by producing and circulating affects, and by allowing expressed emotions to remain unexpressed. The puzzle

is that embodiment and materiality in spirit communication necessarily takes shape around a body that is not there: spirit. Thus, spirit communication interferes with assumptions about the distinction between the material and the immaterial, the representation and the thing, the body and the mind. Not only does spirit communication involve the presence of spirit which cannot be made present, so much of what goes on in spirit communication is unspoken and tacit. Not only is spirit communication intensely emotional and personal, it is shared and emotionally contained. Not only is spirit communication routinely, and sometimes jaw-droppingly, accurate, it can also be embarrassingly awkward – and fail completely.

The challenge, then, is to appreciate that spirit communication works because it is indeterminate: capable of containing opposite ideas without contradiction. Thus, spirit communication is successful, not because it offers a clear-as-a-bell line to the afterlife, but rather because its background model is that communication itself is ordinarily difficult, filled with possibilities for failure, and yet somehow works.

The significance of spirit communication also lies in the challenge it presents for understanding what happens *between* people: that is, for understanding the space that is produced between people that enables the ordinary miracle of talking with the dead. It would be easy to interpret spirit communication by placing the medium at the centre. In such an account, the medium both generates the message and manages the communication. Easy, too, to draw on ideas about stage magic (in which demonstrations of telepathy and flying tables are commonplace) to suggest that spirit communication is just theatre, an entertainment, a performance (see Brown, 2007). In the mediumship demonstration, however, the analogue is science, where the scientist publicly demonstrates a scientific principle by repeating an experiment. Except, in the case of Spiritualism, the scientist-medium does not, *must not*, know the meaning of the evidence that is being generated. This creates a challenge for understanding the space of spirit communication, because it cannot simply be understood through the experiences and performances of mediums. This is why we have introduced the idea of inter-mediumship.

For us, intermediumship is a way to recognise the different agencies that are producing spirit communication, including spirit itself. It is also an attempt, provisionally, to provide an account of the emergence and circulation of affects, not just in a religious space, but through the production of a space *between* – which is predicated on its ordinariness and familiarity, rather than its enchantments or sacredness. We have shown that this space is produced, in part, by evoking the physical presence of spirit, through the body, through materiality, through place. While we understand the efficiency of the standard formula for affect – “the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected” – this underplays several significant features of spirit communication. First, some bodies have no body. Second, affect can be many, indeterminate, contradictory, fleeting. Third, affects are sometimes shared, but there is no necessary reason why they should be. Fourth, where affects are shared, this needs to be accounted for, not presumed. Fifth, affects need forms (which do not have to be material). Finally, while affects might be mediated – that is, intervened in or arbitrated – this requires a notion of agency that is hard to square with one key agent in spirit communication: spirit. These points are blunt, but they all represent key challenges to how we describe and account for “the emergence of affect” in specific places at specific times.

All of which might make spirit communication seem extraordinary or special or simply too weird to pay much mind to. We have been clear: spirit communication works because it is embedded in ordinary life, not because it is detached from it. It works because it locates itself in people’s real world experiences. The failures and difficulties that mediums and congregations experience in trying to figure out a message are not different from those experienced in everyday life. More than this, spirit is never confined to the church nor to the moment of spirit communication. Spirit is through daily life – and perhaps this is the most difficult challenge of all.

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